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Soviet denials on pope's shooting backfire

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ROME — A communist public opinion blitz denying the involvement of the Soviet Union or Bulgaria in the plot to kill Pope John Paul II appears to have backfired.

As the trial of the eight men charged with complicity in the assassination attempt moves sluggishly into its second week, the effect of European public opinion is beginning to take a discernible toll on the two nations, one a recognized superpower, the other a satellite. The stakes are enormous for both.

Every night Radio Moscow devotes considerable time to denouncing the trial. Picked up from Izvestia, the government newspaper, is a series, "Anatomy of Provocations," which includes blistering personal attacks against the presiding magistrate, Judge Severino Santiapichi, and the prosecutor Antonio Marini.

The commentary, broadcast in every major European tongue, demands the charges against the three Bulgarian

defendants be dropped, that the lone Bulgarian in custody, Sergei Antonov, be released immediately and that the Italian court apologize to the defendants.

The cry has been echoed by every major Communist party publication in Europe.

In London, for example, the Communist daily, "Morning Star" charged that the trial is "no mere legal mistake."

Claiming the proceedings are an attempt by "imperialism to gain a propaganda coup by linking the pope's fascist assailant with the security forces of Bulgaria and the Soviet Union," the Star said: "Journalists close to the CIA and others willing to go along for the ride, planted the story in the U.S. press, and then arranged for its distribution worldwide."

Using precisely the same words and phrasing as communist newspapers in France and Italy, the Star said "it was only a small step to arranging for the fascist-riddled security and legal arms of the Italian state to arrest Sergei Antonov in an elaborate frame-up."

No mention has been made in the Com-

munist media about the five Turks accused in the plot.

At one of the entrances to Rome's bustling Piazzale Clodio, where the Court of Assizes sits in judgment on the defendants, the Italian Communist Party has set up a large, colorful exhibit blazing with posters denouncing the trial as a "CIA kangaroo court."

The Italian Party has long characterized the proceedings as another Sacco and Vanzetti trial, harking back to the sedition trial that convulsed America in the early part of the 20th century.

Passersby are encouraged to sign petitions demanding Mr. Antonov's release and an end to the "imperialist charade."

The point of this well-orchestrated campaign, said one Italian official close to the trial, is to divert attention from the real issue: Soviet-Bulgarian involvement in the attempt to kill the pope.

It seems to be having the opposite effect, however. There is scarcely a non-communist newspaper here that does not link the words "trial" with "Bulgaria" or "Soviet."

The word "conspiracy" already has entered the working vocabularies of everyone around the trial and journalists scoff at suggestions that there might not be a plot.

If the mood is one of incredulity when the Communist press mentions the CIA, questions persist here about the curious statements by the CIA on the trial and the apparent flip-flop in its analysis of events surrounding the May 13, 1981, shooting in St. Peter's Square.

Sources close to U.S. intelligence figures say the CIA has put a lid on statements about the trial. Previously, the agency had been passing the word that the murder plot was too "unprofessional" to be a KGB operation.

However, former CIA Director Richard Helms has maintained from the very start that the alleged use of the Bulgarian Secret Service DS to hire, train, and equip terrorists for the papal shooting was "a classic KGB operation."

Efforts to reach CIA spokesmen here and elsewhere in Europe have been unsuccessful.